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SUBJECT: RECENT MAJOR DRUG CASES IN VIETNAM

REF: 02 Hanoi 618

1. (U) Summary. A recent large drug trial in Ho Chi Minh City concluded on February 26, with the People's Court handing down four death sentences, four life imprisonments, and other lengthy prison terms. 140 other suspects are to be tried at a later date. Other cases in Son La, Da Nang, and Nghe An have resulted in relatively large seizures and numbers of arrests, indicating a possible increase in the amount and effectiveness of enforcement activity. End summary.

HCMC CASE: DEATH AND LIFE SENTENCES

2. (U) According to press reports, police in Tien Giang province in coordination with the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) arrested Ngo Xuan Phuong, Ngo Duc Minh, and nine other members of a drug trafficking ring in May 2002 (reftel). On February 23, the eleven stood trial in Ho Chi Minh City. The Ho Chi Minh City People's Court handed down four death sentences, four life sentences, and three other long prison sentences three days later, convicting them of trafficking about 39 kilograms of heroin, 50 kilograms of cannabis, 15 kilograms of synthetic drugs and 6,000 ATS tablets over the past ten years between Laos and Cambodia and on to Vietnam and Japan for consumption. They also bought Ecstasy tablets in the Netherlands to sell in Ho Chi Minh City, according to press reporting. Colonel Bui Xuan Hieu, Standing Office for Drug Control of Vietnam, called the case "very serious" due to the trans-national activities of the syndicate.

DRUG BUSTS IN DA NANG AND NGHE AN

3. (U) Separately, in Nghe An, a province that sits astride a trade route to Laos, the police arrested 10 suspects in February 2004 and seized approximately seven kilograms of heroin. According to the traffickers' initial confessions, the offenders had already trafficked about 87.5 kilograms of heroin, press reports stated. (Note: the GVN considers this the largest drug case in Nghe An's history. end note)

4. (U) On February 27, the "biggest case ever recorded in Da Nang" took place, according to police sources quoted in VNExpress. Searching the home of offender Nguyen Quoc Viet, the police seized six kilograms of heroin. The cases in Da Nang and Nghe An are still under investigation, according to press reports.

NORTHWEST PROVINCE OF SON LA GETS SOME ACTION TOO

5. (U) In the first two months of 2004, Son La provincial police have arrested 215 suspects in 85 separate narcotics cases, and seized 3.7 kilograms of heroin, 6.6 kilograms of opium and a large quantity of ATS. (Note: The large number of individual cases and the relatively small amounts of heroin and opium indicates that many of these arrests were of users and low-level dealers rather than large traffickers. UNODC has identified Son La as a province with a severe drug use problem, especially in the ethnic Hmong community. End note.)

MORE TO COME

6. (U) According to VNExpress, gang leader Ngo Duc Minh escaped the death penalty through "honest confession" of having trafficked 24 kilograms of heroin and 50 kilograms of cannabis. (Note: according to the Vietnamese Penal Code, possession of 100 grams of heroin is punishable by death. End Note.) Police expect Minh's confession to lead to further arrests and seizures.

7. (SBU) Ho Chi Minh City's cases in the first two months of the year demonstrated an increase in the number of arrests and the quantity of drugs seized over the same

period last year. Doris Buddenberg, UNODC representative in Hanoi, told poloff that the recent uptick in activity is a result of a small increase in drug smuggling and a larger increase in enforcement actions, and noted that street-level heroin was less available in Hanoi recently. Le Van Truong, Section Chief of MPS' Counternarcotics Department, separately attributed the increase to "improved investigation and combat techniques" in MPS and increased coordination among law enforcement agencies following a directive in 2003 from Prime Minister Phan Van Khai ordering greater interagency cooperation on counternarcotics.

PORTER